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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to identify the characteristics exhibited by the exceptional community college teacher, this study examined applications for the U.S. Professors of the Year Award, a national competition that annually rewards four professors-one each from community colleges, baccalaureate colleges, master's universities, and research universities-with a $5,000 check and recognition. All candidates nominated from 1995-97 were reviewed, with special attention paid to demographics, gender, degrees attained, and other descriptive information about the nominees. The study looked in more depth at 13 candidates from 1997, exploring the ways in which their teaching was characterized by the candidates themselves, their current and former students, institutional administrators, and academic colleagues. Four general areas in which the nominees excelled were: promotion of student success, service beyond the classroom, innovative teaching, and professional development. This analysis shows that, clearly, these teachers have had a strong impact on their students emotionally as well as intellectually, and have gained trust and admiration across the campus community. Sections of the report include: (1) the U.S. Professors of the Year Program; (2) Who Are the Nominees?; (2) the Meaning of Excellence in Community College Teaching; (3) Promoting Students' Success; (4) Service Beyond the Classroom; (5) Innovative Teaching; (6) Professional Development; and (7) Words of Praise. Appended is a list of 44 descriptive words used in letters of recommendation. (AS)

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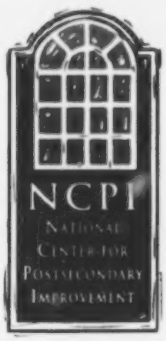

Exceptional Teaching in Community Colleges: An Analysis of Nominations for the U.S. Professors of the Year Program, 1995-1997

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Community colleges are crucial sites for those concerned with the quality of teaching in American higher education. The last decade has seen many initiatives encouraging more attention to teaching by faculty at the nation's four-year colleges and universities, but so far few reformers have paid much attention to what is happening at two-year institutions. This is doubly unfortunate. As the most teaching-intensive sector of higher education, community colleges have much to gain by joining with senior institutions in taking a new look at teaching and learning. At the same time, however, they have much to contribute to the conversation, because of their wide range of academic, technical, developmental, and enrichment programs, the diversity of their students, and the priority they place on teaching in their systems of faculty roles and rewards.

It is really no surprise that professors in four-year institutions know so little about what and how their colleagues in two-year institutions teach. Indeed, it is not easy for faculty at any institution to find out what those down the hall are doing in the classroom. This situation stems in part from the rudimentary development of a scholarship of teaching in higher education. In contrast to basic and applied research, there are still relatively few forums for making teaching public—for informing colleagues on one's own and other campuses about accomplishments, discoveries, or innovations in ways that can be critiqued and built upon. In this paper, we turn to a national award program as a window on the world of community college teaching. By examining the dossiers of professors nominated by their institutions for the U.S. Professors of the Year Program, we identify the demographic characteristics of the nominees and explore how exceptional teaching in community colleges is exemplified and described.

A national competition sponsored by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) and The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the U.S. Professors of the Year Program has been rewarding and publicizing excellence in undergraduate teaching since 1981. Originally open only to CASE's member institutions, the program was restructured in 1994 so that all accredited higher education institutions were eligible to nominate faculty for the award. At the same time, the program, which had previously named just one national winner each year, began naming four—one from each of the major categories of colleges and universities recognized by the Carnegie Foundation's *A Classification of Institutions of Higher Education*, 1994 edition. These changes effectively opened the program to the nation's 1,449 community colleges and assured that one community college professor would receive national recognition each year.

Now that the special award for Community Colleges Professor of the Year has been in place for a few years, the nomination materials provide a rich resource for exploring the kinds of teaching these institutions deem nationally competitive. As our investigation shows, the elements constituting "extraordinary dedication to undergraduate teaching" go far beyond interaction with students in the community college classroom. The pool of nominees for the U.S. Professors of the Year Award represents some of the most inspirational work being carried out by current community college instructors. Innovative classroom teaching is important, of course, but so are contributions reaching beyond the classroom to community and international projects, curriculum reform movements, and public dissemination of educational developments. Although nominations for this award are not necessarily representative of all, or even most, examples of excellent community college teaching nationwide, an examination of the nominations may still inform us as to what qualities students, colleagues, administrators, and

the instructors themselves value in teaching—qualities that the teachers among them presumably strive to achieve.

The U.S. Professors of the Year Program

The U.S. Professors of the Year Program makes widely publicized and prestigious awards in order "to increase awareness of the importance of undergraduate instruction by honoring individuals who bring respect and admiration to teaching." It provides awards to four national winners annually, one each from community colleges, baccalaureate colleges, master's universities and colleges, and research and doctoral universities. Winners also are named from each of the fifty states and the District of Columbia, provided there are sufficient entries. All awardees receive certificates of recognition; the national winners also receive an invitation to the October awards ceremony and other honorary celebrations in Washington, D.C., as well as a check from The Carnegie Foundation for $5000 each. In addition, most state and national winners receive many invitations to speak about teaching on their own and other campuses, as well as at meetings of regional and national associations. For colleges and universities, an award provides opportunities to publicize an honored teacher.

Nomination forms are distributed annually to colleges and universities throughout the country. Each institution can nominate up to three candidates, but the procedure for choosing the candidates is up to each campus. For each nominee, an institution must submit a one-page entry form, signed by the campus' chief academic officer, dean, president, or chief advancement officer; a one-page curriculum vitae focused on teaching; a teaching log for the most recent academic year; a two-page personal statement "describing a key contribution made as an undergraduate teacher"; a maximum of six letters of recommendation, including at least two written by current or former students and at least two written by colleagues; and a check for $50 to cover administrative fees. Since 1994, the program has received between 500 and 600 applications each year.

Judging is accomplished in three phases. First, two preliminary panels assembled by CASE select most of the state winners and between 25 and 30 national finalists—from six to eight from each type of institution. Then, The Carnegie Foundation convenes a special panel to select from these finalists the remaining state winners and the four national awardees. Winners are chosen by all panels on the basis of their "extraordinary dedication to undergraduate teaching," as determined by excellence in the following four areas: 1) impact on and involvement with undergraduate students; 2) scholarly approach to teaching; 3) service to undergraduate education in the institution, community, and profession; and 4) support from colleagues and current and former undergraduate students. These criteria no doubt influence the personal statements of the candidates as well as the recommendations they receive.

For the purposes of this paper—to examine how exceptional teaching is exemplified and described in community colleges—we examined all applications from community college candidates from 1995, 1996, and 1997 for basic demographic and descriptive information. From this pool, we studied thirteen of the 1997 applications in depth, looking at the ways in which their teaching was characterized by the candidates themselves, their current and former students, institutional administrators, and academic colleagues. These thirteen nominees included

the eight state award winners from community colleges for 1997 and five other nominees whose applications struck us as particularly interesting and representative of the four qualities of teaching that we discuss below.

Who Are the Nominees?

Our first step was to look at who was nominated and by whom for the 1995, 1996, and 1997 Community Colleges Professor of the Year award. For the years in question, our data base of community college applications consists of 209 nominations from 125 colleges in 36 states.[1] It should be noted, of course, that although these faculty were nominated to represent their institutions in the competition, they are not necessarily representative in any statistical sense of either their institutions or community college faculty more generally.

This set of teachers differs most obviously from most community college teachers in their full-time employment status. In contrast, 64 percent of community college faculty nationwide are employed only part-time (NCES 1995). Not only do part-time instructors teach fewer classes, earn lower salaries, and engage less fully in campus life, but they also are less visible to presidents, deans, and department chairs, and thus have fewer opportunities to be recognized as outstanding teachers.

We examined gender next, on the basis of the nominee's first name and/or pronominal use in their letters of recommendation, whenever possible. Slightly more women than men were nominated for the award in our target years: 106 women (51 percent), 102 men (49 percent), and one person whose gender was not ascertainable. This proportion is slightly skewed in favor of women by comparison with national figures for community college faculty as a whole. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's National Faculty Survey found in the spring of 1997 that 53 percent of community college faculty were male, while The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that men accounted for 52 percent of the faculty at two-year institutions in fall 1995 (Huber 1998; NCES 1995: 2-6).[2] Unfortunately, it was not possible to determine the ethnicity of most of the applicants, although by name and description, it appears that ethnic minorities have few representatives. Some individuals' letters of recommendation and/or statements of purpose explicitly state their ethnicity and its role in their identities as teachers.

We also examined the fields of study taught by the nominees, as stated on their application forms or determined by the names of courses they taught. For the purposes of this analysis, teachers' disciplines were combined into thirteen broader disciplines, as follows (Table 1). The numbers of nominees, by gender, teaching in each of these thirteen discipline groups is presented in Table 2.

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Table 1: Broader Disciplines

Broader discipline:	Fields included:
Business/Administration	Administrative Careers, Business Technical Education, Business/Computers, Career Development, Office Systems Technology
Computer Information	Computers, Computer Information Systems, Computer Science, Information Science
Developmental Courses	Developmental English, Developmental Reading, Developmental Studies
Education	Early Childhood, Educational Technology, Elementary Education
Fine/Performing Arts	Art, Fine Arts, Music, Communication Design, Woodwork
Health Science	Animal Health Technology, Child Care, Health and Wellness, Health Science, Health Technologies, Human Services Technology, Medical Laboratory Technology, Mental Health, Nursing, Physical Education, Respiratory Care
Hospitality	Culinary Arts, Hospitality Education
Humanities	History, Humanities, Philosophy, Religion
Language Arts	American Sign Language, Communications, English, English as a Second Language, Foreign Languages, French, Journalism, Radio/Television, Spanish, Speech, Speech Communication
Life Science	Biology, Botany, Conservation, Life Science, Science
Mathematics	Mathematics
Physical Science	Astronomy, Chemistry, Electronics, Engineering, Geology, Physical Science, Physics
Social Science	Anthropology, Economics, Government and Politics, Law, Psychology, Social Science, Sociology

Table 2: Gender Distribution, by Discipline[3]

Broader discipline:	Number of Nominees	Number of Females	Number of Males
Language Arts	52 (24%)	31	21
Mathematics	31 (14%)	12	19
Social Science	22 (10%)	11	11
Health Science	19 (9 %)	15	4
Humanities	18 (8 %)	3	15
Physical Science	16 (7 %)	3	13
Life Science	15 (7 %)	5	10
Fine/Performing Arts	12 (6 %)	6	6
Business/Administration	11 (5 %)	8	3
Computer Information	9 (4 %)	4	5
Developmental Courses	5 (2 %)	5	0
Education	3 (1 %)	3	0
Hospitality	2 (1 %)	2	0
Total	215 (100%)	108	107

Clearly, most faculty members nominated by community colleges teach courses that are applicable for associate's degrees or for transfer to senior institutions—i.e., courses that satisfy breadth or major requirements. Language Arts has the highest number of instructors (52), with

English most highly represented within that category (35). Second to Language Arts is Mathematics, represented by 31 nominees, followed by Social Science (22 nominees), Health Science (19 nominees), Humanities (18 nominees), Physical Science (16 nominees), and Life Science (15 nominees). Most of the nominees thus hold positions in fields similar to their counterparts in four-year colleges and universities. The remaining nominees teach in disciplines which are either vocational, developmental, or potentially degree-applicable but which tend to attract students who want an enjoyable course that does not necessarily build toward a future career or education. These areas include Business/Administration, Computer Information, Developmental Courses, Education, Fine Arts, and Hospitality.[4]

Qualifications for community college instructor positions generally include a master's degree (or whatever is deemed its equivalent) in the area to be taught or in a related area.[5] However, many of the nominees have educational qualifications far beyond these requirements. Four out of ten (41 percent) applicants hold doctoral degrees; of the 56 percent who have at least a master's degree, 41 percent have studied well beyond that degree.[6] Four nominees have as their highest degree a bachelor's degree, and one (who teaches Culinary Arts) has a community college degree. More than twice as many male nominees hold doctoral degrees (58) than do female nominees (24). As can be seen in Table 3, the distribution of doctoral and master's degrees varies according to the nominees' disciplines, with the majority of doctorates being held by nominees in Language Arts, Humanities, Social Science, and Mathematics.

Table 3: Highest Degree Attained, According to Discipline

Broader discipline:	A.A.	Bachelor's	Master's	Doctorate
Business/Administration			9	2
Computer Information			6	1
Developmental Courses			5	
Education			3	
Fine/Performing Arts			7	2
Health Science		3	11	4
Hospitality	1	1		
Humanities			4	13
Language Arts			27	20
Life Science			7	8
Mathematics			17	12
Physical Science			7	7
Social Science			7	13

The number of years nominees have taught in higher education as instructors (not teaching assistants) ranges from one to forty-three years, with an average of eighteen (determined only from those 178 nominees whose applications specify how many years they have been teaching). This statistic is in exact agreement with the national average length of time community college instructors have served in higher education—eighteen years (Huber, 1998). It should be noted that, among applicants in this study, some disciplines tend to be taught by teachers with many years of experience in the profession as opposed to pedagogical experience—nursing, for example. In addition, many nominees have experience teaching in K-12 institutions.

The Meaning of Excellence in Community College Teaching

The U.S. Professors of the Year award is designed to recognize "outstanding instructors for their commitment to teaching." The application materials reveal that much of what contributes to a commitment to teaching goes well beyond what instructors do (or teach) in the classroom. Many of the students' letters of recommendations concentrate on the time and energy their instructors put into teaching, both inside the classroom and outside, during office hours as well as during other opportunities for one-on-one interactions with their students. The nominees, however, as well as their colleagues and institutional administrators, emphasize the work they do above and beyond their actual teaching, work which presumably enhances their teaching ability and effectiveness in the classroom as well. These teachers share their knowledge and professional experiences with colleagues, share their teaching and activities with people not traditionally part of an academic setting, and encourage and enable their students to use their classroom experiences to influence people in nonacademic settings and to help improve life in their own communities and beyond.

From preliminary readings of the 209 applications (including the nominees' statements of purpose and their letters of recommendations), we identified four broad areas in which teachers were said to excel. Not surprisingly, these bear a family resemblance to the criteria for judging announced in the application instructions, and include: 1) promoting students' success, 2) service beyond the classroom, 3) innovative teaching, and 4) professional development. As noted earlier, thirteen applications (including eight state winners and five others) were selected as those that best represented these themes. These applications were then examined in depth, focusing on the characteristics that identified these nominees as excellent teachers, the activities in which they engaged, the teaching strategies they employed, and the words and phrases used by others to describe them.

Promoting Students' Success

> His greatest strength is his relationship with students, and his commitment to their academic success. [Administrator]

While teachers, students, and administrators are equally impressed with the importance of promoting their students' success, and with these nominees' abilities to do so, the three groups focus on different aspects of success.[7] The administrators (generally of higher institutional status than the nominees), colleagues (generally of equal institutional and academic status), and students (of lower academic status) are presented here as three distinct groups not only because of their distinct relationships with the nominees, but also because they identify different characteristics and use different language to describe their highest priorities for evaluating teaching and its related responsibilities.

Colleagues tend to focus on what the nominees teach, including much more than the content of individual courses. For them, effective teaching results in students' acquiring tools they can take with them to other classes. As one colleague writes:

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> [He] simultaneously teaches his students the contents of a course and enables them to effectively communicate their knowledge to their peers. [He] also encourages his students to develop methods of inquiry that will serve them well in any discipline.

Students focus their appreciation for excellent teachers on two distinct areas: The first is their teachers' availability to help them, both in the classroom by establishing a comfortable rapport, and outside the classroom by offering their time in office hours and on informal, spontaneous occasions. Here are three students speaking about three different nominees:

> I felt comfortable and safe in that classroom. By safe I mean I felt that if I, or anyone, asked a question noone would be made fun of or looked down upon. She welcomed questions and comments and she answered them very thoroughly and clearly. You walked out of that classroom knowing what was explained that day.

> [This instructor] always stayed at the end of class to help anyone, including the sleeper, with assignments or ideas or even personal problems, which many felt they could share with him . . . [His] office door was always open.

> If and when you had a question about something outside of class she was always in her office, and she always seemed to be devoted to her students by helping them as much as possible, and always being there for them.

Secondly, many students experience the effect their teachers have had on them as a psychological transformation, in which they not only change their opinion about the subject studied, but also change their core beliefs about their own abilities and even their future life course. These students report a growth in self-confidence and a new belief in their potential to succeed, beginning in the world of academia, and carrying out to the "real" world:

> By the end of the semester, I had confidence in my writing abilities.

> I learned something very important in his class, and that was to see life from a different perspective.

> I experienced personal growth on a level I never thought possible . . . it was wonderful and fun to see myself gain confidence as a speaker.

> This shared learning experience . . . made [his] class more than just a place to earn three credits. Instead, it became an arena, a platform from which to grow, expand, and develop.

> He saw me, as I believe he sees each of his students, as an individual with unique gifts . . . He pointed out the potential in each of my compositions. He passed on to me his enthusiasm for learning and urged me to reach for the stars. I began to believe that I could do just that . . . Subtly, along the way, I acquired a sense of self-worth.

Although some students who wrote letters of recommendations for their teachers were clearly strong students from the beginning, many of them began their studies with fears, learning disabilities, or low levels of motivation, only to be inspired by their teacher to love the subject matter and to experience the pleasure of academic success. For some the experience was a lifetime transformation:

> I soon realized I was watching a magician at work. [He] took students who were afraid of writing, those who just didn't care at all about the subject and those who cared deeply about it, and, magically, transformed us all into writers for a semester, hopefully, for a lifetime.
>
> [He] is the kind of teacher who reaches something deep inside and makes one want to learn. He inspires confidence when previously there was none . . . To say that [he] changed my life would be an understatement. He saw intelligence in me that I never knew existed . . . [He] helped to give my life meaning and pointed me in a direction where I could feel good about myself, while helping other students as [he] helped me.
>
> Without her, I would not be what I am today. For example, I was heavily into drugs, alcohol and committed to prison. I thought that my life would never change. [She] had a big part in helping me make the new life I have today. She gave me the support, willingness, and encouragement to never give up. Most of all, the positive affirmations she gave me boosted my very low self-esteem to a positive one.

These students did not necessarily get the highest grades or master the course materials with ease. Rather, they were the students who were most positively influenced by their classroom experiences. They exerted tremendous energy and effort to achieve in their classes with these particular teachers; as a result, their lives changed significantly, and they came to believe in themselves.

Along with their newly-found confidence, these students feel as though windows of opportunities have been opened to them; their teachers have shown them a vast range of possibilities for their futures—about which they were previously unaware—and have given them the courage to take risks.

> She has shown me a side of myself, as a writer, that I had never taken seriously before. This has opened my eyes to a new realm of possibilities for myself, both academically and professionally.
>
> Influenced by him, I have learned to love and appreciate history. Nurtured by his mentoring, I have made the teaching of history my life-long ambition. He alone took the most unlikely student and instilled a love and appreciation for learning. He has taught me to question and analyze the lessons from the past and to strive to be a dedicated historian and educator. Very few individuals have the ability to cause a positive fundamental change in the life of another person. [This instructor] is one of them.

What kind of teacher can have such impact? According to students' letters of recommendation, the most inspiring professors did more than simply teach the subject matter successfully. In fact, learning the actual course content is rarely mentioned. This is not to imply that the students have not learned the class material. But students either take for granted the teaching prowess of a professor nominated for a national teaching award, or see teaching for learning as less important than teaching for life.[8] Whatever the reason, rather than describe the nuts and bolts of teaching syllabi, materials, tests, and techniques, students concentrate on how the courses and teachers have helped them reach, and set, personal goals.

A common theme runs through these letters: a testimonial that students have, through the particular teacher's contributions, gained insight into the world and belief in themselves. As a result of their learning experience, many students describe newly discovering an ability to achieve and excel. Their horizons broadened and their ambitions increased. This benefit was recognized not only by students, but by colleagues as well. Corroborating student statements, one colleague said of a nominee that she shows her students "the academic environment for which they are striving [;] it becomes a reality instead of a distant, intangible dream."

Service Beyond the Classroom

> [This professor]'s leadership and service are not limited to our campus . . . because she is also active at the regional and state levels. [Administrator]

Many nominees for the Community College Professor of the Year award stress the importance of teaching their students skills which will later help them to gain employment; student letters of recommendation echo this emphasis in their appreciation for teachers' concern over students' futures. Perhaps what makes these instructors stand out from many other dedicated and successful community college faculty, however, is their introduction of other, more selfless motives for gaining skills, in particular teaching their students to be able to help others. These nominees also help their colleagues and others in their region and beyond.

Teachers help students reach beyond their campuses in a number of creative ways, introducing them to unfamiliar places and to peoples worlds apart. They do this physically, through field trips; symbolically, through literature and other media; and collaboratively, through active service, carrying out projects designed to help out. One instructor of English, for example, worked with his students to edit a volume of fiction by world-renowned authors as a fund-raiser to support the people of Bosnia during the civil war. While his educational objective was to help his students acquire writing skills, he did so by means of a real project with service goals—an endeavor in which, everyone reported, his students played an active role, and from which they could learn more about writing than one learns simply by exercise.[9]

Colleagues and administrators, in contrast to students, focus less on what the teachers have done for individual students and more on their contributions to their departments, colleges, and the profession in general:

> [She] continuously seeks ways to improve the educational experience for nursing students, as well as nursing faculty, and maintains community link-

ages to identify creative community partnerships for the college. [Colleague]

> [She] accepted the responsibility to strive to develop a more student friendly and academically stronger campuswide developmental mathematics program. The goal was to obtain a higher student retention rate than the present 35-40 percent and many adjustments were implemented . . . Thus, in two years, under [her] leadership, the student retention rate has increased 20 percent for the thousand plus students enrolled per year to obtain the specific math competency level required for graduation. [Administrator]

Administrators emphasize especially the voluntary nature of the nominees' hard work, which they do out of dedication to their profession and from heartfelt concern for the people on whom their work has an impact.

> . . . he is invariably the first to be called for extra duty above and beyond the teaching duties because of his well-known willingness to serve and his commitment to do a job once he accepts it . . . I believe the quality that most sets [him] apart and makes him uniquely qualified for the . . . Professors of the Year Program is his training of *other* teachers—elementary school teachers. His love of science and the teaching of science transcends his regular normal teaching assignments and extends to devoting enormous amounts of time and energy to *voluntarily* teaching other educators about science and ways to teach science. [Administrator]

> I would reiterate to the Selection Committee that all of the activity on the part of [this instructor] is *outside and over and above* his paid job of teaching biology at [our college]. He does this because he loves science, he loves students and loves to see the two get together. He is special—Very, Very Special! [Administrator]

Finally, in addition to their appreciation of the nominees' hard work and spirit of giving, administrators, more than the nominees' colleagues or students, applaud the public recognition these nominees obtain for their colleges. Consider the following two examples from administrators' recommendations:

> I believe that the nature of his educational leadership was epitomized recently when he assumed the role of faculty linchpin in the [community college district's] recent associate of arts degree reform effort—an effort that resulted in one of the most progressive and academically responsible A.A. degrees in the nation. This degree and the associated curriculum governance process have received state and national recognition as a model for curriculum reform. I chaired the process that governed this degree reform, and I can say unequivocally that without [his] leadership, the project would not have resulted in this type of success.

> He is constantly adding to his accomplishments and endeavors on behalf of [our community college] and its students . . . Taking history directly to the Greater Cleveland community, he connects educational components to projects such as

> the 1992 visit of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Moving Wall, the construction and the dedication of a Veterans Memorial on the grounds of the Western campus, programs commemorating the 50th Anniversary of D-Day, the Battle of the Bulge, VE Day, Korean War veterans, and the Vietnam War. These projects and programs attracted more than 50,000 visitors to the College as well as providing far-reaching local and national media coverage . . . On countless occasions, [this instructor] served as the College's media contact regarding historical events and anniversaries.

Innovative Teaching

> He employs strategies which require students to employ process skills and hands-on applications rather than the more traditional methods of presentation. [Colleague]

Another theme commonly addressed by nominees and recommenders is the nominee's approach to teaching, especially when he or she has developed an innovative teaching technique. One nominee, a professor of music, stresses the scholarly nature of his teaching approach and illustrates his technique in a way that stresses its simplicity and common sense:

> There are only three fundamental things that are necessary for success as a conductor—a thorough, historically based understanding of what a given piece of music should sound like, a knowledge of how each instrument makes the various sounds of which it is capable, and the ability to persuade and motivate a group of eighty or so people to accept your concept of what the piece should sound like and to work toward it.

Like this nominee, many others describe their "personal philosophy" about teaching, and express pride in having developed their own approaches:

> I resurrected Zora Neale Hurston and have presented Zora and her work to over 3,500 students. In my one woman show as Zora, "she" talks about the cultural and historical phenomenon that was Black America from the turn of the century until the 1950s. After the performance, the students ask "Zora" questions; then, I come out of character and they ask me, as a scholar, questions.

> The program grew out of a belief that science courses should be taught in a "hands-on/minds-on" manner where the students are active learners, not passive participants. The teacher, in this method, is a facilitator for investigation and learning rather than "spoon-feeding" knowledge to the students. Our new science program is founded on this philosophy.

Nominees and recommenders alike emphasize that compassion for the students, understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, and respect for their personal interests are requisite ingredients for successful teaching. For example, one nominee writes:

> Not only is the gift precious: the students I am passing it on to are precious, too. This is the other essential element in transmitting gifts: you must respect the intended recipients. Sometimes my students are ready to accept the proffered gift. At other times they are not able to see what I see in it. Sometimes they are simply too tired from having worked into the night stocking grocery shelves or caring for sick children. Respecting the recipients means understanding that you owe them more than enthusiasm. You owe them patient instruction in how to appreciate the gift for themselves. You even owe them the right never to share your enthusiasm for some things.

And, from a colleague:

> Our student population is tremendously diverse. We are located in one of the ten poorest cities in the United States. We have a high percentage of minority students and many are adults juggling family, jobs, and nursing education simultaneously. [This instructor] embraces this diversity as one of the greatest strengths of our program. She approaches every student with a high level of respect and consistently individualizes each student's program planning to promote success within our program.

Students echo this perspective, often expressing their appreciation for teachers who care about whether, how, and why their students learn. Guided by such teachers, these students learn to think and operate independently. One says about a teacher of writing:

> [Her] class is unique in that she believes we all have creativity flowing in our minds, but we haven't been able to allow our creativity to show nor grow because someone was always holding our hand or telling us how things needed to be done.

Another student, speaking of a mathematics professor, writes:

> As I recall, one of the first things he did was to move our small class of about 8 or 10 students from a standard classroom to the friendlier environment of a conference room. This made the class seem more like a committee of problem solvers, with [this instructor] as our team leader, rather than a standard class . . . He typically would channel the discussions to include some broader points, or significant mathematical ideas that required deeper thinking. This often resulted in an interesting project or homework assignment. This style of teaching/coaching, I believe, enabled us to experience the true nature of mathematical thinking, instead of the typical lecture/study/test mode of classroom instruction.

While specific examples of innovative teaching are numerous throughout the applications, awareness of the generally positive nature of innovative teaching is often expressed by colleagues and administrators. Faculty who are able to use several different techniques are particularly admired.

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> [He] displays an insatiable appetite for teaching and learning and constantly works to find new and better methods of teaching science and to share the methods with others. [Administrator]
>
> I know he often teaches new courses to keep himself mentally active, and that he seeks productive innovation within the classroom. [Colleague]
>
> I have been especially impressed with her student centered approach, her belief in her students' ability to succeed, her innovative approach to subject matter, and her empathy to effectively relate to our diverse student population . . . She utilizes a variety of instructional modalities to good effect: collaborative learning, group activities, discussions, multi-media, lectures. [Administrator]

This mix of techniques that create student-centered classrooms are innovations that are held in especially high regard. As one administrator notes of a candidate:

> He demonstrates a scholarly approach to teaching while incorporating cooperative learning, field trips and technology in his classroom.

Professional Development

> [She] is dedicated to scholarly excellence both in and out of class. She has been actively involved in professional development activities that have expanded her horizons and impacted her instructional excellence. [Colleague]

Colleagues value and admire the degree to which the nominees develop their work professionally, by demonstrating an ability to critically evaluate and improve upon their work publicly and/or in collaboration with others, as well as on a more personal basis. Many of the instructors have made great efforts to work with fellow faculty members to help them improve their teaching on a one-on-one basis as well as in workshops. These applicants also disseminate their knowledge of teaching through publications and conference papers, neither of which is a requirement in their job descriptions.

Although publishing is not usually highly supported or encouraged by community colleges, given the teaching demands on their faculty, many nominees in this pool have numerous publications targeting both academic and lay-audiences.[10] In fact, most of the nominees' one-page resumes include abridged lists of publications, awards and grants received, and conferences attended. Publications range from textbooks and teachers' manuals to artistic works of poetry and fiction and empirical, scientific research intended for an audience of academic researchers.

Few community college instructor positions are designed to allow time for carrying out research. Still, many of the nominees take it upon themselves to apply for grants which give them resources to be able to investigate and improve their teaching, as well as to achieve recognition for their institutions.[11] As one colleague notes of a candidate:

> [He] has been instrumental in writing grants for both Texarkana College and East Texas State University-Texarkana to improve science education.

Likewise, the majority of the applicants actively participate in workshops, conferences, and other arenas beyond their campuses, where they can improve their teaching and share their knowledge. Again, a colleague remarks:

> [Her] search for knowledge to help students has led her to various states and conventions where she devours the presentations and the ideas of her long-distance peers.

Certainly, the recommendations suggest that the candidates are held in high esteem for keeping up to date in their subject area, although the comments remain mostly in a general vein, rather than addressing specific types of scholarship, original research, and/or the nominees' involvement in them.

> I want to reiterate the great respect I have for [his] commitment to teaching and to scholarship, to service to his community, and to demonstrating his concern for his students by providing them with both understanding and concrete approaches to develop their writing competency. [Administrator]

> All English department meetings are enriched by [his] presence because of his thorough knowledge of his chosen field, which he keeps current through constant research. [Administrator]

Recommendations are more specific in regard to curriculum development and teaching techniques. Indeed, many of the nominees are seen as leaders who have taken the initiative to share their pedagogical achievements with other teachers. For some, the audience is local:

> He has shared this enthusiasm for teaching and writing and his student centered approach to education with his colleagues and the community. In the English department, for example, [he] has initiated discussions and projects concerning curriculum development and academic policies, has shared successful assignments and syllabi, and encouraged and assisted new faculty. [Colleague]

Others have gained a wider hearing:

> [He] has also been a pioneer in the development of interdisciplinary, team-taught curriculum which we call "Coordinated Studies" or "Learning Communities." In these programs three or four faculty from different disciplines and a group of students explore a theme or an issue. Our work in this area has attracted national attention. This curriculum innovation might have been just another bright idea but because of [his] concern for academic quality, it is well-grounded in good scholarship which will give it continued intellectual legitimacy. [Colleague]

Perhaps most striking is a nominee who worked with the Reform Calculus Consortium at Harvard University. Because the majority of students, his included, are "mathematically reluc-

tant," this professor views it as his job to understand his students' difficulties and their potential, and to give them tools to understand mathematical concepts and to apply them in their own fields. He has helped to reform calculus teaching techniques, develop a new calculus curriculum, write manuals for other instructors, and disseminate the method to administrators and developers of standardized tests (e.g., Advanced Placement and Scholastic Aptitude tests). As to his effectiveness, one colleague remarks:

> It is quite clear that the mathematics reform movement has benefitted enormously from [his] ability to involve faculty who are cautiously wondering if it is for them, to support those who are already committed, and to argue eloquently with those who are opposed.

Words of Praise

> He brings a quiet love of teaching and excellence of knowledge to his classroom. His droll humor and wry smile will bring looks of admiration and love from his students . . . [Administrator]

The preceding pages have demonstrated that administrators, colleagues, and students differ in the emphasis they give to the four themes discussed above; however, they differ not only in *what* they discuss, but also in *how* they discuss it. That is, in addition to differing in the relative importance they assigned various aspects of teaching, the writers of the letters of recommendation also wrote about them in different ways, using different words of praise.

In order to illustrate the ways in which these three groups described the nominees, we further examined the same subset of thirteen applications. For each group, we looked at the lexical items that were used to describe the nominees' achievements in promoting students' success, service beyond the classroom, innovative teaching, and professional development. From all the letters of recommendation which mentioned any of these four themes, a list of descriptive words was compiled, and their frequency was counted for each of the three groups—administrators, colleagues, and students. This list consisted of 44 words and their derivatives (see the Appendix for a further discussion of method and results).

It is interesting to note, for example, that the terms "leader" and "leadership" were used with great frequency by both administrators and colleagues, but not at all by students. "Leader(ship)" comprised thirteen percent of the descriptive words used by administrators, fourteen percent of those used by colleagues and, of course, zero percent by the students in this data set. Administrators' most frequently used descriptors (each comprising ten percent or more of the words counted) were "respect," "leader(ship)," "dedicated/dedication," and "love (of teaching/of work/of students)." Two of these also comprised more than ten percent of colleagues' descriptive words: "dedicated" and "leader(ship)." The third favorite of colleagues was, significantly, "scholarly/scholarship," accounting for eight percent of their choices, in contrast to only four percent for administrators, and less than one percent for students.

The students' top choice was "encouraging," comprising fourteen percent of their descriptive words, in contrast to only two percent each for administrators and colleagues. Their second

most frequent descriptor was "love" (seven percent), followed by "dedicated," "enthusiastic," "challenging," and "confidence." The word "challenging" was not mentioned at all by colleagues or administrators, and "confidence" (used in the context of building or increasing students' self-confidence) was mentioned in only two percent of the administrators' selections, and not at all by colleagues. Clearly, while the students, colleagues, and administrators in this study had some common ways to describe good teaching, the words of praise that were unique among their top choices indicate something special about the perspective of each group.

Conclusion

The analysis in this paper demonstrates that community college nominees for the U.S. Professors of the Year Program are highly admired and appreciated, and that they are seen as possessing a special gift for teaching. The analysis also demonstrates that teachers can be exemplary in many ways. Four general themes emerged from our reading of the nomination materials: promoting students' success, service beyond the classroom, innovative teaching, and professional development.

While most of these faculty have had a good education and many years of teaching experience, their contributions—as they themselves describe them, and as testified to by administrators, colleagues, and students—do not only come from what they have learned in a formal setting. In fact, some of the ways in which they are appreciated as extraordinary teachers are not distinguishable from ways of being extraordinary people. Through their unique talents, these individuals have had a strong impact on their students emotionally as well as intellectually, and have gained trust and admiration across the campus community.

Clearly, these nominees for the U.S. Professors of the Year Program already serve as models for their students and for a varying range of colleagues on campus and beyond. Yet their very success raises challenging questions for community colleges specifically and, indeed, for higher education as a whole. No one would deny the importance of recognizing the achievements of individuals so capable of reaching out to others. Nor would anyone deny the educational value of the inspiration these teachers provide. The fact is that some portion of these nominees' effectiveness is *personal*—they possess qualities of character that set them apart and make them shine. What distinguishes *teachers* from other persons with similar qualities of character? Is there a certain level of disciplinary and pedagogical expertise involved?

The critical questions raised by the U.S. Professors of the Year Program and similar campus-based awards for teaching concern how to extend these teachers' range. One common strategy is simply to bring gifted teachers into touch with more people, through seminars, lectures, mentoring programs and the like. Another approach, however, is to ask whether some of their achievements, innovations, and discoveries are amenable to being shared with others in ways analogous to basic or applied research. To some extent, of course, faculty have already done this through textbooks and teaching materials that are widely available through publishers (and, more and more, the Internet and World Wide Web). To some extent, too, this is accomplished when talented teachers write about what they do: see, for example, the collection of essays, *Inspiring Teaching*, by several U.S. Professors of the Year (Roth 1997). Still, there is a

need for more forums and more support for the dissemination of scholarship about teaching, so that gifted professors, like those featured in this study, can reach others more effectively, and so that all faculty can participate in communities of discourse that take teaching as seriously as it deserves.

Endnotes

[1] Community colleges sent in 222 applications, but, for the purposes of this study, 13 were deleted due to uncertainties about their classification as community colleges. The remaining 209 nominations include some incomplete applications (i.e., missing letters of recommendation, statements of purpose, or resumes), and are included in the demographic portion of this study but not in the qualitative analysis of individual applications and descriptions of excellent teaching. In regard to geographical distribution, the five states with the highest representation are: California (29 nominees), New York (16 nominees), Florida (14 nominees), Texas (14 nominees), and Pennsylvania (13 nominees). Fourteen states were not represented at all by community colleges for this three-year period.

[2] As opposed to nominees, the large majority of the nominators in our data base are male (as determined by first names, whenever possible): the 120 males, as opposed to 72 female nominators, may be indicative of the gender distribution of people in the higher ranks of academic administration, such as presidents and deans. Interestingly, male nominators nominated slightly more male teachers (63) than females (57), while female nominators nominated more women teachers (42) than they did men (30). Seventeen of the nominators were either committees or individuals whose gender was not ascertainable.

[3] Several nominees taught in two of these "broader disciplines"; therefore, the numbers add up to more than the number of applications.

[4] Certain gender differences may be worth noting here. A larger proportion of women than men taught language arts (29 and 20 percent), health sciences (14 and 4 percent), and developmental, education, and hospitality courses (9 and 0 percent). By contrast, men were more likely than women to teach humanities (14 and 3 percent) and physical science (12 and 3 percent).

[5] For example, requirements for a full-time English as a Second Language position typically include a master's degree in Applied Linguistics, Linguistics, Education, or English, or a teaching certificate and certain amount of graduate-level coursework. Requirements generally also include previous teaching experience, preferably in higher education.

[6] In comparison to the national average for community college instructors, a higher percentage of these nominees hold doctorate degrees. Sixty-four percent of all community college faculty have master's degrees as their highest degrees, in contrast to 56 percent for this set of nominees.

[7] Letters of recommendation were written by: 1) current or former students of the nominees, 2) colleagues who were instructors at the same institution as the nominee, and 3) administrators (college presidents, deans, etc.). In a few cases, there was some overlap between these categories, as in the case of colleagues who had previously been students of the nominees.

[8] We are grateful to Barbara Cambridge for reminding of us of this latter possibility.

[9] This particular instructor was not one of the thirteen whose nominations were examined in depth, but was in fact winner of the national Community Colleges Professor of the Year award in a previous year.

[10] In responding to the Carnegie Foundation's National Survey of Faculty, 1997, very few community college faculty (5 percent) reported that regular research activity was expected in their position, but about 40 percent said they were currently engaged in scholarly work that they expect to lead to a publication, exhibit, or performance. In regard to teaching, however, community college faculty reported that they spent around 15 hours a week teaching undergraduates during the fall of 1996, as compared to 10 hours a week for faculty at baccalaureate and master's institutions. Community college faculty also spent more time providing student tutorial aid (5 hours a week) and academic advising (4 hours a week) than faculty at other types of institution (Huber 1998: 24-25).

[11] In responding to the Carnegie Foundation's National Survey of Faculty, 1997, about 20 percent of community college faculty report that they have received a grant or special funding support for research in the last three years (Huber 1998: 25).

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Appendix

Descriptive Words Used in Letters of Recommendation

The following is a list of the 44 descriptive words whose frequencies were counted in the letters of recommendation for the thirteen applications which were studied in depth. Only those letters of recommendation which included comments relating to the four themes were used for this count. While the main word stems are listed here in terms of frequency, grammatically related derivatives were also counted. Thus, for example, the count for the term "empower" also includes mentions of "empowers," "empowered," and "empowerment." In other cases, only particular meanings of the words were counted. The term "concern," for example," included mentions of "concern," "concerns," and "concerned," but only in the semantic sense of "feeling interested in or worried about." However, when the term was used with other meanings, it was not counted—as in the phrase, "she wrote three statements concerning the number of molecules in her sample."

As we did not control for equal numbers of words for each of the three groups, not to mention equal numbers of letters (writers), the count is only useful as an indication of differences in the way that administrators, colleagues, and students describe the qualities of exceptional teachers.

Forty-four descriptive words used in letters of recommendation

accessible
admire(d)
articulate
available
caring/care
challeng(ing)
committed/commitment
compassionate
concern(ed)
confidence
conscientious
creative
critical
dedicate(d)
demand(ing)
difficult
dynamic
empower(ed)
encourag(ing)
enthusiastic/enthusiasm
fair(ness)
fun
gift(ed)
innovative, innovation
inspir(ation)
integrity
intelligence
interesting
involved/involvement
leader(ship)
love
model
outstanding
passion
patient
popular
positive
professional(ism)
respect
scholar(ly)
support(ive)
trust
understandable
understanding

Frequency of descriptive words used five or more times by administrators, in ascending order

	Administrators	Colleagues	Students
admire(d)	5	1	1
concern(ed)	5	2	4
enthusiastic	5	5	7
love	10	4	9
dedicated	10	10	7
leader(ship)	13	13	0
respect	14	5	6

Frequency of descriptive words used five or more times by colleagues, in ascending order

	Administrators	Colleagues	Students
committed	4	5	0
caring	2	5	6
respect	14	5	6
enthusiastic	5	5	7
scholar(ly)	4	7	1
dedicated	10	10	7
leader(ship)	13	13	0

Frequency of descriptive words used five or more times by students, in ascending order

	Administrators	Colleagues	Students
demanding	0	0	5
patient	1	4	6
caring	2	5	6
respect	14	5	6
challenging	0	0	7
confidence	2	0	7
enthusiastic	5	5	7
dedicated	10	10	7
love	10	4	9
encourage	2	2	18

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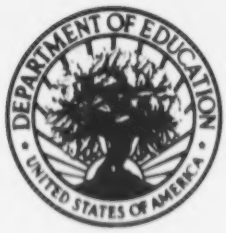

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